



Listening to Head Start teachers working with dual language learners in multilingual classrooms

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INTRODUCTION

Dual language learners (DLLs) often refer to 0 to 5-year-old children who simultaneously develop language skills in English and their home language(s). DLLs comprise a significant proportion of young children living in the U.S.: Over 7.4 million children, or one in three children under five, live in a household where a language other than English is spoken (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). While Spanish is the most prevalent home language among DLLs, there has been an increasing representation of non-Spanish-speaking DLLs in U.S. education (Park et al., 2018). In Ohio, where DLLs represent 13% of children from birth to age five (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.), over 90 languages are used by students receiving English language services in the PreK-12 school system, with Spanish as the home language for 40% of those students (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.)



The research literature emphasizes the importance of quality experiences in early childhood education (ECE) programs for DLLs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017; Park et al., 2018). Unfortunately, many early childhood educators, who themselves are English monolinguals (Cannon et al., 2012), often experience difficulties working with DLLs and their families in multilingual classrooms where children have a wide variety of home languages. Further, many teachers have misconceptions about how a second language develops (Sawyer et al., 2017) and have limited training opportunities in dual language education (Park et al., 2018).

Over the last few decades, research has accumulated substantial knowledge about what works for DLLs in classrooms where DLLs share the same home language (e.g., Spanish). Those include providing frequent opportunities to engage in conversations with adults and peers, being intentional about supporting both English and home language development (e.g., learning and

incorporating keywords and phrases in DLLs' home languages in a classroom), inviting adults who speak DLLs' home language to the classroom, pairing DLLs with English-speaking children for classroom activities, and creating many opportunities for small group interaction (National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning [NCECDTL], n.d.). Additional suggestions include using supportive methods, such as “visual aids, gestures, emphasizing important words in a sentence, keeping the message simple, and repeating key vocabulary words” (Castro et al., 2011, p. 17). While these recommendations also apply to multilingual classrooms where multiple languages are presented among DLLs, it takes more preparation, time, and effort to implement these practices in multilingual classrooms than in classrooms where DLLs share the same language. Some scholars also note that there may be critical additional considerations for effective DLL practices in multilingual classrooms (Baker & Pérez, 2018; Park et al., 2018).

To provide a richer portrait of the current status of DLL education in multilingual classrooms, we listened to and observed teachers working with DLLs in preschool classrooms serving children ages 3 to 5. We documented their beliefs, practices, and needs for working with DLLs and their families. The context for this study was Head Start, a federally funded comprehensive early care and education service for children and families from households with low incomes. In Head Start nationally, 28% of children have a language other than English spoken in the home, with more than 140 languages represented (Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2019). Acknowledging the linguistic diversity present in its program, Head Start has long been committed to providing “developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate” services for DLLs and their families” (Office of Head Start, 2008).



STUDY DESIGN AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Questions

In this mixed-method study, we heard from teachers serving DLLs in their Head Start programs to learn about their beliefs and practices on dual language learning and education. We further sought to understand the supports, challenges, and needs of these teachers when working with DLLs and their families. This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What beliefs do teachers have regarding dual language learning and education for DLLs, and what practices and strategies do teachers use when educating DLLs?
2. What supports, challenges, and needs do teachers identify for educating DLLs?

Participants, Methods, and Analysis

This study utilized multiple methods, including semi-structured open-ended teacher interviews, a survey of teacher beliefs on dual language learning, observation of classroom materials and environments relevant to DLLs, and quantitative data on teachers' language use in classrooms. The interview data were analyzed using structured thematic content analysis (Saldana, 2013) to identify themes within qualitative data. Descriptive statistics were estimated for the remaining quantitative survey and observation data.

Data were collected from eight Head Start lead teachers and their classrooms with preschool-aged DLLs in two towns and a city in a U.S. Midwestern state. Seven teachers were non-Hispanic white, and one teacher was African American. The teachers had various educational experiences: one teacher had an associate degree, four had a bachelor's degree, and three had a master's degree or higher. Teaching experience in ECE ranged from 2 to 15 years, averaging 6.63 years. All eight teachers reported being English monolinguals. Five teachers led one full-day class each, and three teachers led two half-day classes each. The teachers worked with 3 to 16 DLLs in their classrooms. The home languages of DLLs included Spanish, Arabic, Somali, Russian, Nepali, Tigrinya, Burmese, French, Karen, and Hakha Chin.



HOME LANGUAGES
(represented in participating classrooms)

Spanish: Español

Arabic: العربية (al-'arabiyyah)

Somali: Soomaali

Russian: Русский (Russkiy)

Nepali: नेपाली (Nepālī)

Tigrinya: ትግርኛ (Tigrinya)

Burmese: ဗမာစာ (Bama s̄a)

French: Français

Karen: ကညီကလုံး (Kanyaw)

Hakha Chin: Laiholh (Hakha)



FINDINGS

Teacher Beliefs and Practices

Four themes emerged in our study of teacher beliefs and practices on dual language learning and education.

Theme 1: Teachers used instructional strategies for DLLs but felt unprepared to teach DLLs effectively.

Most teachers used different instructional strategies when working with DLLs than monolingual children, but they were unsure about their practice. As shown in the interview excerpts below, the teachers who felt they had some preparation expressed that it was derived from their own experiences rather than from formal training or education.



(I) f I do [feel adequately prepared to teach], it's kind of an accident. It's more based on my experience than the training I'm getting here.



...in my education when I'm getting my bachelor's [degree] they didn't really talk about DLL a lot. They alluded to it, but they didn't talk about DLL. They didn't really teach you about DLLs, and how to best help DLLs, in the education process. So, as far as I'm concerned, I don't feel like I'm adequately capable... it's kind of difficult sometimes to make sure when I'm doing right things for my DLLs.

Data from the teacher survey indicated that none of the teachers received training on teaching DLLs in the past year. This may explain teachers' feeling of unpreparedness to teach DLLs. Further, teachers who had training in teaching DLLs at some point as part of their in-service professional development expressed that the training was basic, minimal, and insufficient to learn how to help DLLs and their families.

Theme 2: Teachers felt comfortable teaching DLLs when they had support.

Teachers reported a higher level of comfort in teaching DLLs when they perceived that they had support. Teacher-identified common sources of support include bilingual colleagues, translation programs and translators, parents, regional education service agencies, and mentors. Teachers also identified opportunities for accessing and having training, curricula, educator

materials (e.g., Spanish-English dictionary, bilingual books, Google translate, assessment tools in the home languages, and translation of class materials), and research as helpful resources.

Teachers with limited training and experience working with DLLs reported less comfort working with DLLs, especially those whose home language was not Spanish.

Theme 3: Teachers often used different practices for instructing DLLs.

The majority but not all of the teachers reported that they use differentiated instruction for DLLs (6 out of 8 teachers). The two other teachers reported that they used universal instructional practices for all children regardless of their DLL status. Examples of differential instructional practices teachers reported using included simple repetitions, repetitive songs, slow-paced instruction, non-verbal cues (e.g., sign language, gestures, picture cues, visuals prompts, and hands-on materials), bilingual labels in classrooms, individual interaction with DLLs, pairing up DLLs with English-speaking children in small groups, having English books with varying difficulty level, setting up routines, and one-on-one instruction of different vocabulary words.

Observation of classroom materials confirmed that many teachers used specific instructional strategies for DLLs. Six classrooms had labels and pictures attached to furniture or toys in their DLLs' home languages. All classrooms had written materials (e.g., books) in a language other than English, and six classes had audio materials (e.g., audiobooks, music CDs, or iPad apps) in at least one of their DLLs' home languages.



Theme 4: Teachers believed in the importance of fostering the home language of DLLs, but some perceived that parents often prioritize their children’s English development over home language development.

Teachers reported that they view learning multiple languages positively and support the children in keeping their home language. Teacher beliefs survey data validated these findings (Table 1).

Table 1. Teacher beliefs on dual language learning and education ($N = 8$)

SURVEY QUESTIONS	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
It is important that dual language learners maintain their home language skills	4.75	0.46
Speaking multiple languages is beneficial for children and should be encouraged, both inside and outside of the classroom	5.00	0.00
Being bilingual has a positive impact on students’ future academic success	4.88	0.35

Note. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree. Survey items were from Sung & Akhtar (2017).

Teachers further shared that parents of their DLL children wanted their children to learn English, and some parents emphasized them learning English only. The parents’ emphasis on their child’s English learning made it difficult to educate DLLs.



Some families do not want to keep the home language. That is a small percent [of] what we’ve had, but every once in a while, you get a family saying, ‘Only English (parents).’ And it’s like ‘What about your home language? (teacher),’ ‘No. Only English (parents).’

Support, Challenges, and Needs

Teachers shared their perceptions of support they received as well as challenges and needs related to more effectively working with DLLs and their families.

Support: Teachers have some support to work with DLLs, but such support is limited to Spanish.

Teachers shared that they had support from the administration or bilingual assistant teachers. Many said they had a translator available for home visits and had access to a phone interpreter service for communicating with the DLLs' parents. However, such support is reported to be limited to Spanish. Findings from the teacher survey showed that while learning materials (e.g., books) were available in at least one non-English language across all eight classrooms, such available materials do not represent all home languages reflected in the classroom. This confirms the teacher-reported need for accessing materials in the diverse home languages of all DLLs in their classroom.



...it's not just like they're all Spanish, you know, and they just all speak Spanish. But, like they're Burmese, and they have all these different dialects that go with it. So, [I need] somebody to support all of those different dialects or to help me understand that better. So, I can help the kids.

Challenges and needs: Communication with DLLs and their families is a main challenge. Some teachers develop solutions by working with interpreters, coworkers, and technologies.

Teachers reported that communicating with DLLs and parents was the most challenging aspect of educating DLLs.



It's challenging when it's difficult to communicate with parents. Because at this age there's a lot of nuances and how you relay messages about behaviors and about issues in the classroom, or about expectations in the classroom, and so when, you know, when I can only say so many things to mom, or I have to like get it translated, it just, it kinda takes away from the personal relationship part of it. And it feels more clinical, and that makes the relationship harder to build. And then... it's harder probably for the parents to trust that I have this child's best interest in mind...

Teachers also identified other challenges, such as assessing DLLs' English proficiency, slow progression in emergent literacy, instruction during group activities, and shortages in individualized instructional time, materials, and technology.

“...Teachers, and I am not sure I'm not the only one, would, mark children [DLLs] functioning at a lower level [than they really are]... I feel like that, then that way I have done a disservice because I'm thinking this child is at lower level and functioning at a lower level.

In classroom observations, teachers rarely use non-English language, with an average of < 0.5 percent of all words used by teachers. Half of the teachers never used a non-English word.

While teachers reported bilingual colleagues helpful, a teacher mentioned practical difficulties in having personnel (e.g., bilingual teachers) who could speak all of the languages needed, given the diversity of languages in her class. Then, she shared a strategy of working with her bilingual coworkers to communicate better with diverse DLLs and their families.

“Would I want a bilingual interpreter?... That would be great if we could. Right now, we have so many different languages, I don't think it would be possible for one person to speak all the languages we have in the classroom... I have access to a lot of different coworkers that speak different languages, so, I can always kind of, find somebody that help me in a last minute without getting an interpreter.

Teachers shared that technology can potentially overcome communication barriers with parents during home visits or conferences.

“...we try to... use the Remind [app], so it'll translate to their language or a text message, so I use my phone, sometimes a phone to send [parents] a text, and it will convert to their language. And that really has helped me with some of the communication problems. I send it in English, and then their phone is set up to have it convert from my English to their language

“If I have a difficulty and the child isn't able to understand what I am asking, thanks to technology, I can get on Google and I can find the words that he or she needs...

“(I)f I had a little, a little device that would automatically interpret it for me, that's easy to use, I would love that.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviewed teachers have pro-bilingual beliefs and use flexible and creative strategies in multilingual classrooms, but they feel unsure about their preparation and use different instructional approaches relying on their own experiences rather than training or evidence-based practices. Teachers shared multiple challenges working with DLLs and their families, such as difficulties in communication, and expressed that they need additional support, especially for DLLs whose home language is not Spanish.

This study's findings and current literature offer the following recommendations for ECE teachers and administrators.

1. **Offer more frequent and in-depth professional development opportunities for ECE teachers working with DLLs and their families.** Teachers relied on their experiences rather than training when working with DLLs due to limited professional development opportunities. Research offers substantial information about what works for DLLs in classrooms, especially when DLLs share the same home language (e.g., NCECDL, n.d.). While there are far fewer tools and supports for teachers to embrace linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms, available professional development opportunities have shown promising outcomes (Hurwitz & Olsen, 2018).
2. **Consider linguistic and cultural diversity presented in classrooms when supporting teachers and families.** Teachers identified a need for support in languages beyond Spanish. Linguistic and cultural diversity among DLLs has increased and is expected to be more pronounced in the U.S. educational system in the coming years (Part et al., 2018). Such demographic trends depict the increasing importance of offering high-quality learning opportunities for all children, including DLLs whose home language is not Spanish.



3. **Enhance linguistic and cultural diversity in the ECE workforce by recruiting and retaining ECE workforce who resemble the linguistic/cultural characteristics of the serving children.** Teachers consider bilingual teachers who speak the language of serving children as an important support system. Further, research shows that children benefit from consistent exposure to their home language and English (NASEM, 2017). Since diversifying the ECE workforce can support both English-monolingual teachers and children, the need for linguistic and cultural diversity in the ECE workforce has long been acknowledged in the field (NAEYC, 1995; Park et al., 2018).
4. **Support parents to value bi/multilingualism as an asset.** Teachers stated that DLL parents prioritize their children's English development, which contradicts teachers' pro-bilingual beliefs. ECE programs can support parents' awareness of the importance of home language use and maintenance (Oliva-Olson et al., 2019). The process should proceed with mutual respect and consideration of the parents' wishes.
5. **Develop collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers.** Teachers identified parents as an important support system to better educate DLLs. In line with our findings, the literature acknowledges that family engagement is important for teachers working with DLLs to better serve their DLL children (Oliva-Olson et al., 2019) and for early learning (Halgunseth et al., 2013).
6. **Explore technologies promoting communication with diverse families with diverse linguistic backgrounds.** This study identified that communication is a key challenge for teachers working in multilingual classrooms. Acknowledging that traditional communication methods teachers use with families are not effective for some families whose linguistic backgrounds differ from teachers, technology has been suggested as one of the potential solutions to promote parent-teacher communication (Gauvreau & Sandall, 2019).



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